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The Populist Radical Right and the Pandemic

Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser¹  and Paul Taggart^{2*} 

¹School of Political Science, Universidad Diego Portales, Santiago, Chile and ²Department of Politics, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

*Corresponding author. Email: P.A.Taggart@sussex.ac.uk

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Abstract

COVID-19 shocked the world and provided a particular challenge for populist radical right (PRR) forces. We lay out three research questions that this special issue addresses through case studies of the PRR in government in Brazil, Hungary, Turkey and the US and in opposition in France, Italy, Germany and Spain: (1) How have PRR actors responded to the pandemic? (2) How have PRR actors framed the politics of the pandemic? and (3) What have been the effects of the pandemic on the popularity of the PRR? We explain the case selection of this special issue and summarize the main findings of the eight case studies, which show that the pandemic did not severely damage the PRR and that they had very different responses to the challenge. This reinforces the idea that the PRR is not ephemeral but is rather the by-product of structural transformations of contemporary societies and is here for the foreseeable future.

Keywords: COVID-19; populist radical right; nativism; authoritarianism; populism; electoral support

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a sweeping crisis across the world. Almost as soon as the effects of the pandemic began to be felt, commentators started to suggest that the pandemic looked to be a major challenge to the wave of populist radical right (PRR) forces that many countries have seen in recent years. However, the impact of the pandemic on the ideological and electoral success of the PRR is much more complex than many academics and pundits alike suggest. By way of illustration, despite the incompetent handling of the pandemic by Donald Trump in the US, he was able to mobilize more than 70 million voters in the November 2020 presidential election, which he nevertheless lost to Joe Biden (Roberts 2022, in this special issue). At the same time, Angela Merkel in Germany encountered decreasing public support for lockdown measures during the second wave of the pandemic, and groups linked to the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) became increasingly active in orchestrating demonstrations against her government (Lehmann and Zehnter 2022, in this special issue). In turn, the cases of Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey reveal that PRR actors

in government were able to deal with the health crisis in a relatively successful way – at least during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (Batory 2022; Laebens and Öztürk 2022, both in this special issue).

The pandemic and its link to populism has received scholarly attention from comparative political scientists. Very early on in the pandemic, in June 2020 Giorgos Katsambekis and Yannis Stavrakakis (2020) generated a comparative report looking at 16 countries and argued that there was no evidence that the pandemic was significantly damaging the populists – whether in opposition or in power. They also noted that there appeared to be early signs of divergent responses. Jakub Wondreys and Cas Mudde (2022) have more lately indicated that it is far too simple to claim that the PRR is a victim of the pandemic. Similarly, a recent comparative study on how populists around the world responded to COVID-19 (Ringe and Rennó 2022) reveals that identifying common trends for the PRR is anything but obvious.

To better understand the impact of the pandemic on the ideological and electoral success of the PRR, it is important to think systematically and to provide comparative analyses that help us to figure out how PRR forces have been adapting and changing their agenda to cope with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast to the opinion of various commentators, it seems that there is great variance in the effects that the pandemic has had on the PRR. With the aim of analysing this variance, this special issue works with a case-selection rationale that distinguishes between PRR forces in government and in opposition. The reason for this lies in the fact that in theory, one can expect that the former will be punished by the electorate because of the consequences of the pandemic, while the latter can use the pandemic to attack the establishment because of its alleged mishandling of the pandemic. However, one should be aware that ‘time’ is an important variable to be considered, particularly because the so-called ‘rally-round-the-flag’ effect suggests the rallying effect diminishes over time. This draws on the literature on US presidential popularity in times of crisis to suggest that incumbents receive a boost in support at times of threat (Mueller 1970). Extant research reveals the effects can be relatively short lived, can be subject to the effects of (media) framing (Groeling and Baum 2008; Oneal and Bryan 1995) and can be mediated by levels of trust in government (Chatagnier 2012). Taking this forward and applying it to the cases, it means that it is not far-fetched to assert that the first and subsequent waves of the COVID-19 pandemic might have different effects on the PRR and that we might expect to see differences between rally effects for PRR and non-PRR forces. Put in other words, the longer the pandemic lasted, the more PRR forces in opposition could profit by criticizing the establishment for the economic and health crises derived from the pandemic and the less PRR forces in power could benefit from support.

In this framing contribution to this special issue on the PRR and the pandemic, we are interested in clarifying the key concepts, explaining the logic of the case selection, providing a brief comparative overview of the nature of the health crisis and government responses, and presenting the main research questions as well as laying out the key findings, comparatively drawing together the individual case studies. Therefore, the rest of this contribution is divided in four parts. We begin by providing a working definition of the PRR as well as some reflections on how

the pandemic in theory affects the PRR agenda. After this, we explain the case selection and present some comparative data on the countries that are included in this special issue. Subsequently, we spell out the three main research questions of this special issue, namely: (1) How did PRR actors respond to the pandemic? (2) How did PRR forces frame the politics of the pandemic? and (3) What have been the effects of the pandemic on the popularity of the PRR? Finally, we close with the comparisons that we can draw across the case studies in terms of our three research questions and we conclude with implications of these comparative findings.

The populist radical right (PRR)

Although the origins of the PRR can be traced back to Western Europe in the early 1980s, it has become a global phenomenon in the last decade (Mudde 2019; Rydgren 2018). Research on this topic has been thriving, and a growing number of scholars employ the conceptualization advanced by Cas Mudde (2007) in his seminal book. According to him, there are three main defining attributes of the PRR: nativism, populism and authoritarianism. This means that to classify a leader or a party as an example of the PRR, these three attributes need to be present, albeit usually with different degrees of intensity. Before we address this point, let's briefly explain each of the three defining attributes.

First, nativism should be thought of as a synonym for xenophobic nationalism. In more concrete terms, it alludes to the idea that the political system should essentially promote the interests of the native inhabitants, so that both foreign ideas and people represent a major threat to the homogeneity of the nation state (Betz 2017). While there is some variation in who are seen as the most threatening foreigners, most contemporary PRR forces in Europe tend to target the Muslim population, which is usually depicted as professing illiberal ideas that are incompatible with Western values. Closing borders to immigrants and forcing them to adapt to the national culture are some of the most evident policy proposals that are derived from nativism (Mudde 2010).

Second, populism is defined as a set of ideas that not only portrays society as divided between two antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', but also argues that politics is about respecting popular sovereignty by all means (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Not all PRR forces frame the members of 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite' in the same way, but because of the promotion of nativist ideas, they are inclined to consider only the natives as 'the pure people', while they normally portray 'the corrupt elite' as powerful actors who defend progressive values that are allegedly at odds with the ideas and interest of the silent majority. Not by chance, international actors and institutions are a usual target of the critique advanced by the PRR (Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart 2016).

Third, authoritarianism does not refer to the abolition of democracy and the promotion of dictatorship, but rather to the defence of a hierarchical notion of society, according to which any type of deviant behaviour should be severely punished. What is considered 'deviant behaviour' varies across cases, but most PRR forces are prone to argue that traditional values should be respected, and immigrants are

depicted as people who not only misbehave but also are incompatible with national culture (Akkerman et al. 2016). Because of the promotion of authoritarian ideas, the PRR usually favours the implementation of restrictive measures in order to secure control and punish what it considers abnormal.

By combining nativist, populist and authoritarian ideas, PRR forces have been able to develop a potent master frame that is useful when it comes to mobilizing sectors of the electorate that are at odds with the progressive values associated with the cultural modernization process that has affected advanced capitalist economies in recent decades (Rydgren 2005). Seen in this light, one could argue that the PRR represents a backlash against the value transformation towards a more liberal society (Bale and Rovira Kaltwasser 2021; Ignazi 1992). In fact, the PRR has a clear cultural agenda at odds with progressive values but it does not have a distinctive economic programme. Depending on the context in which it operates, it can advance neoliberal policies, defend the welfare state or adopt a restrictive approach towards international trade. This gives plenty of room for manoeuvre to the PRR not only to adapt to different socioeconomic realities but also to change its economy policy orientations over time (Rovny 2013).

Moreover, it is worth noting that the intensity of these three definitional attributes – authoritarianism, nativism and populism – varies across cases. For instance, in Europe there is little doubt that nativism is the most fundamental ideological tenet of the PRR. By contrast, in places such as Brazil and Turkey it is possible to argue that authoritarianism is probably the main focus of the PRR, while in the case of Donald Trump in the United States one can think that authoritarianism, nativism and populism are equally important as each of these ideological elements helps to mobilize specific sectors of the conservative electorate in the country. The nature of populism is that it is chameleonic (Taggart 2000), taking different forms in different environments, and for PRR actors this malleability also applies.

How does the COVID-19 pandemic affect these different ideological components of the PRR agenda? Although the contributions to this special issue address this question in detail, at a theoretical level we can identify certain general effects. To begin with, the pandemic generates a political situation that in many ways challenges one of the key tropes that PRR forces usually try to politicize, namely nativism. With the onset of the health crisis and the economic crisis later on, the public agenda shifted away from the immigration problem and debates about the strength of the welfare regime gained much more preponderance. Of course, PRR forces can try to frame COVID-19 as something introduced to the nation by immigrants and foreign countries, but there are clear limits to the plausibility of this type of argument.

When it comes to populism, the pandemic also represents an important challenge to the discourse advanced by the PRR. The more COVID-19 became an evident problem affecting daily life, the more expert guidance from public health authorities and epidemiologists became significant or at least salient. In other words, the pandemic gave increasing relevance to technocratic and scientific authorities, which are usually depicted by the PRR as part of ‘the corrupt elite’ or ‘the establishment’ that is at odds with ‘the pure people’. Nevertheless, as the health and lockdown measures promoted by experts are not necessarily popular among the population, PRR actors can certainly rely on the populist set of ideas

to criticize these measures, demand common-sense solutions and present themselves as the defenders of freedom.

Finally, authoritarianism is probably the ideological tenet of the PRR that more clearly gained preponderance because of the pandemic. After all, the proliferation of the COVID-19 virus led governments of different political colour to adopt harsh measures of surveillance and confinement. Moreover, most states decided to close borders and assert national sovereignty – a classic authoritarian demand of the PRR, which maintains that in order to keep societal control it is necessary to take bold measures and disregard the opinion of both international organizations and foreign governments. Nevertheless, it is unclear if during the pandemic, authoritarian tropes have gained preponderance in the discourse articulated by PRR forces both in government and in opposition.

The comparative context

As we mentioned before, the PRR is nowadays a global phenomenon and the same is true about the COVID-19 pandemic. To better understand the impact of the latter on the former, this special issue works with a case selection that includes four PRR forces in government (Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Donald Trump in the US) and four PRR forces in opposition (AfD in Germany, Lega in Italy, Rassemblement National (RN) in France and VOX in Spain). Even though PRR parties are particularly well established in Western Europe, it has been relatively rare to have cases of a wholly PRR government in Western Europe, and so we have used this region to provide all the selected cases in opposition. The selected cases in government come from different world regions, in which we can find different degrees of institutionalization/personalization of the PRR and in which we can find clearer cases of PRR actors in government.

Although all the selected cases are normally considered instances of the PRR, there is some debate about the classification for some of them. This is particularly true for PRR forces that are relatively novel (e.g. AfD in Germany and VOX in Spain) and for PRR forces outside of Europe (e.g. Bolsonaro in Brazil and Erdoğan in Turkey). Therefore, most of the contributions of this special issue provide some contextual information to justify that the selected cases can be considered instances of the PRR – that is, that they articulate authoritarian, nativist and populist ideas – and also discuss the extent to which additional features might be relevant for better understanding the profile of the PRR in the cases under scrutiny in this special issue.

The main purpose of this special issue is to analyse the extended effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the PRR since the emergence of the pandemic at the beginning of the year 2020 until the process of massive vaccination against the COVID-19 virus that took place until the end of 2021. Given the time considered, this special issue makes a virtue of being able to look at more than only the first phase of the health crisis. Much attention has naturally been focused on the initial reactions of the different states and governments, but as this began to play out as a longer-term issue, there is more possibility to compare initial and subsequent responses and repercussions for the fate of the PRR. Therefore, before

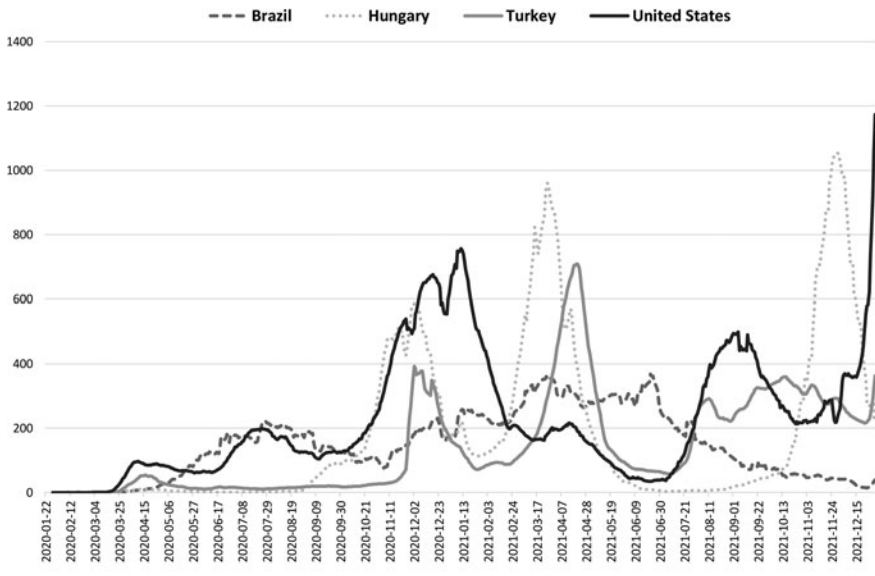


Figure 1. New Daily COVID-19 Cases per Million Inhabitants in Brazil, Hungary, Turkey and the United States, 2020–2021

Source: Dong et al. (2022).

presenting the research questions that each contribution will address, we offer here a brief comparative contextualization of how the pandemic has evolved during the years 2020 and 2021 in the eight countries considered in this special issue.

It seems clear that expectations of one surge of infections effectively combatted by state responses has not been the pattern for many states. In fact, in none of the eight countries analysed in this special issue has there been a consistent decline in levels of COVID-19 infections. [Figure 1](#) shows the pattern of new cases for the four countries with PRR forces in power from the beginning of 2020 until the end of 2021. There is some differentiation here with three high peaks for Hungary and the United States, at least one high peak for Brazil and two high peaks for Turkey. In other words, no common trend can be identified when looking at these four countries with PRR actors in government.

[Figure 2](#) lays out the same data for the four countries where the PRR represent opposition parties. Here the pattern is more uniform, with all states experiencing more clearly several waves of infections. This uniformity may well reflect a relative proximity of the cases as they are all West European countries, whereas for the PRR incumbents the countries span different world regions. What is clear across all eight of the countries considered is that the subsequent waves of COVID-19 have occurred in all of them. Having the whole years 2020 and 2021 in focus, we outline some expectations and variations that we might anticipate. In more concrete terms, we expect that there might be very different dynamics between the initial and subsequent ‘waves’ of the health crisis.

If we look at the rates of deaths attributed to COVID-19 we can see trends that are obviously related to the number of cases of COVID-19. However, the rate of

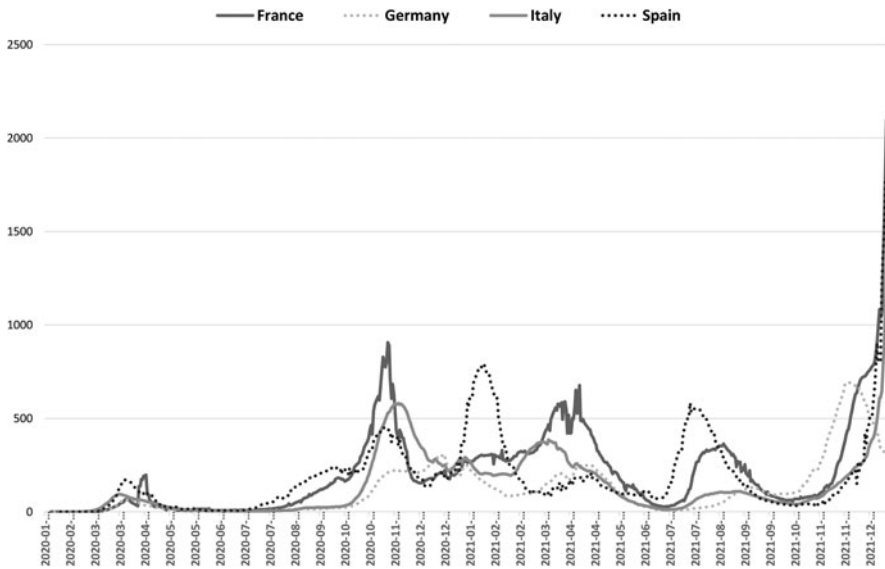


Figure 2. New Daily COVID-19 Cases per Million Inhabitants in France, Italy, Germany and Spain, 2020–2021

Source: Dong et al. (2022).

deaths provides a more critical problem to which governments must respond and therefore can be seen as a better indicator of political pressure. Figure 3 gives the new death levels for the four countries with the PRR in power. There is variation here, with Brazil and Hungary seeing the second waves of deaths at a much higher level than the first. In the case of the United States, there appear to be three waves (as with case levels), while Turkey looks to have relatively stable numbers across the time under consideration. Nevertheless, Melis Laebens and Aykut Öztürk (2022) argue that one needs to be careful with the existing data for Turkey. Simply put, all these patterns permit us to assume that they put pressure on incumbent PRR forces, although at different paces.

Figure 4 gives the death rates for the four countries with opposition PRR parties. We would assume that patterns that show inability or ineffectiveness of government measures would be an opportunity to shore up and pull in new constituencies of those unhappy with governments' COVID-19 responses. In this figure we can see that Italy, France and Spain follow the pattern of a second wave of deaths with lower levels than the first. In Germany we can see that the initial wave looks to have been lower than those in the other European cases but that the second wave sees higher death rates. In terms of blame attribution to governments, we then might expect the PRR in opposition to have less ammunition against their incumbent's government, as the second-wave levels of deaths look to be mitigated by government response and, in the German case, relatively low levels of deaths from the first wave would also blunt frustration with incumbents.

The data so far allow us to consider comparatively the nature of the health threat to the eight countries considered in this special issue. We can also make some

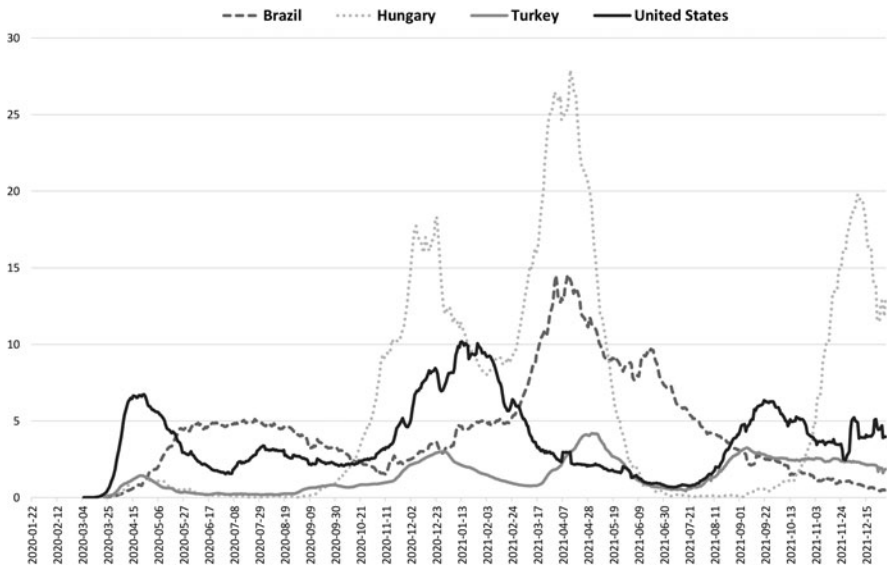


Figure 3. New Daily Deaths Attributed to COVID-19 per Million Inhabitants in Brazil, Hungary, Turkey and the United States, 2020–2021

Source: Dong et al. (2022).

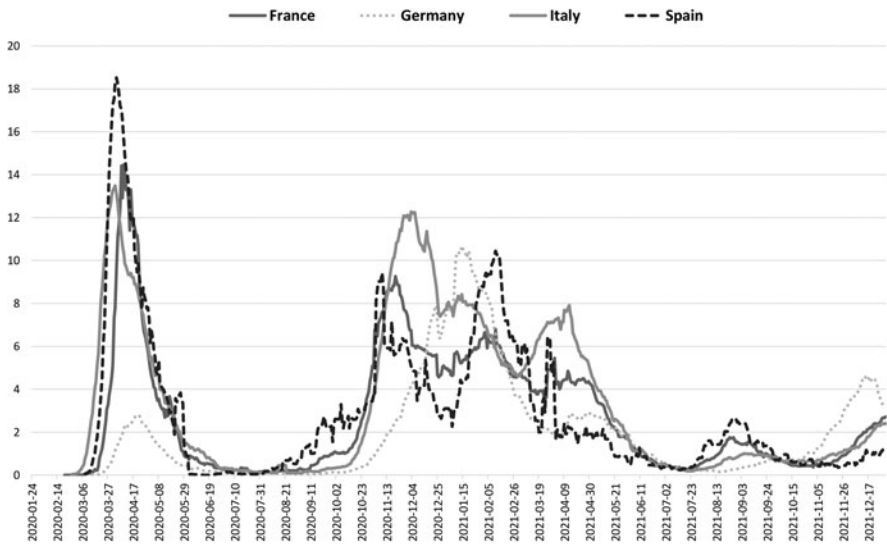


Figure 4. New Daily Deaths Attributed to COVID-19 per Million Inhabitants in France, Italy, Germany and Spain, 2020–2021

Source: Dong et al. (2022).

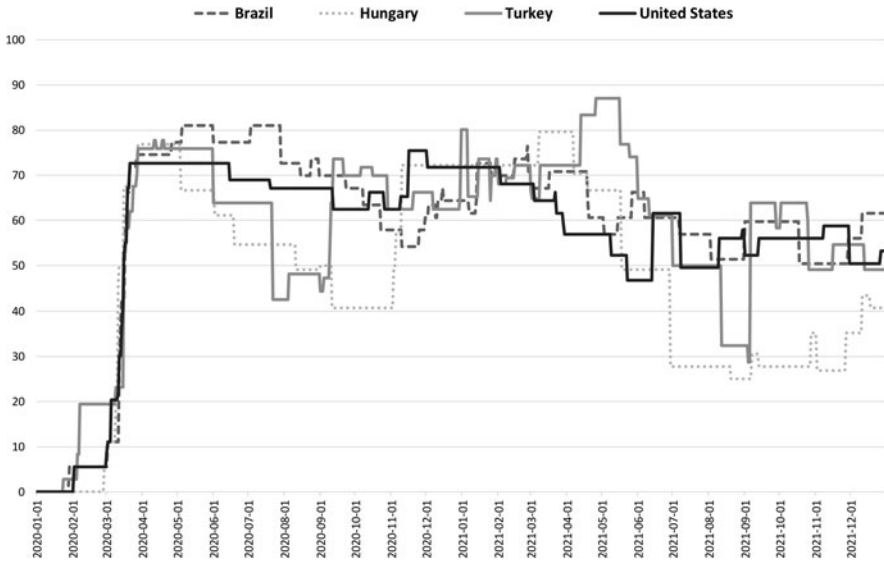


Figure 5. Stringency of Government Responses to COVID-19 in Brazil, Hungary, Turkey and the United States, 2020–2021

Source: Hale et al. (2022).

Note: The stringency index is a composite measure based on nine response indicators, including school closures, workplace closures and travel bans, rescaled to a value from 0 to 100 (100 = strictest).

broad-brush comparisons about what measures governments have implemented in response to the threats, since the latter might open up opportunities as well as constraints for the agenda of the PRR. Researchers at the Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford have monitored global responses to COVID-19 and have produced a measure of government stringency (Hale et al. 2022). This measure aggregates data on school and university closures, workplace closures, cancellations of public events, limits on private gatherings, closures of public transport, home confinement measures, domestic and international travel restrictions and public information campaigns drawn from information provided by experts on the cases.¹ Figures 5 and 6 show stringency for the four country cases with incumbent PRR governments and for the four country cases where PRR forces are challengers.

Comparing the two figures, we can make a number of observations. First, we can see that the patterns are more similar in the case of opposition cases (which are all from Western Europe) than in the incumbent cases. We can also see that overall stringency tends to be higher in the opposition cases than where PRR forces are incumbents, although there are moments with more variation between the cases, probably because of different levels and kinds of threat for each of these countries (see Figures 2 and 4). Put another way, it appears that PRR incumbents are less likely to implement stringent solutions to the COVID-19 threat than non-PRR incumbents. This may be due to their position on the right with a natural inclination against the state and in favour of the free market as much as their populism.

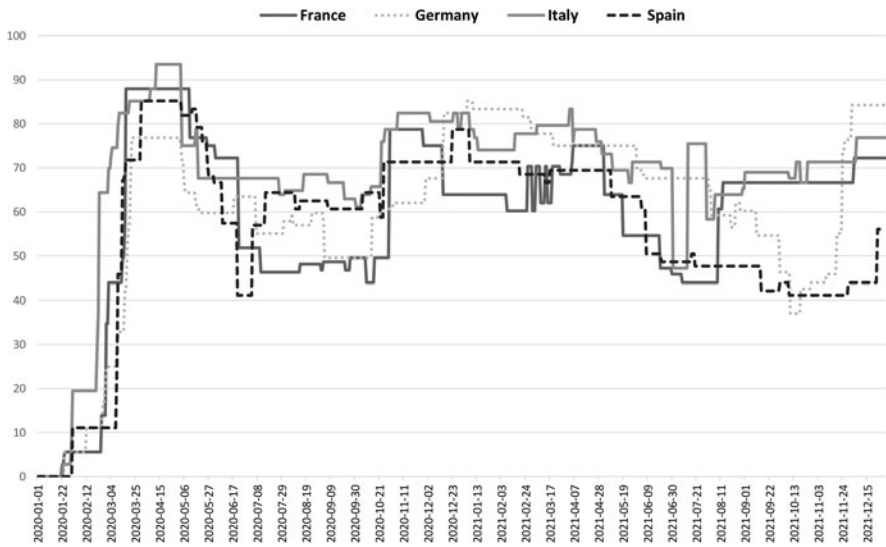


Figure 6. Stringency of Government Responses to COVID-19 in France, Italy, Germany and Spain, 2020–2021

Source: Hale et al. (2022).

Note: The stringency index is a composite measure based on nine response indicators, including school closures, workplace closures and travel bans, rescaled to a value from 0 to 100 (100 = strictest).

Of course, there are different conditions between the countries in terms of the severity of the pandemic and capacity for responses. And the timelines are not entirely equivalent for all cases as some have been hit by the pandemic earlier than others. However, a broad look across the rates of COVID-19 cases and deaths and government responses in the eight countries under consideration does allow us to make two observations that the contributions will examine in more detail. The first observation is that we are dealing with a protracted and uneven health crisis, and one that is by no means over. There is much variation between countries in how the pandemic has been experienced in terms of severity and waves. As a consequence, it is worth analysing if the PRR (acting either in government or in opposition) has benefited or rather suffered across the different waves of the pandemic. The second overarching observation seems to be that there are different conditions (in terms of both health and government stringency) where PRR forces are in power and where they are in opposition. This allows us to explore whether the PRR has reacted in broadly similar (less stringent) ways compared to non-PRR forces.

Research questions

The focus of this special issue is on the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 and 2021. Our assumption is that the pandemic creates both a health crisis and a consequent economic crisis that deeply affect the fate of the PRR in different ways. The centre of attention is on the politics of the health crisis – that is, on how the drastic measures of lockdown and public tracing that have been put in place to

different degrees to control the spread of the virus and to maintain capacities of healthcare systems – that challenges the PRR agenda. However, each contribution also considers some aspects related to the impact of the economic crisis that is unfolding on the PRR. In more concrete terms, there are three main research questions that each of the case studies addresses.

How have PRR actors responded to the pandemic during 2020?

For those in government we seek a characterization of the policy choices made to contain the health effects of COVID-19 and to mitigate the economic impacts that the pandemic and its effects have had. This means looking at how stringently the lockdown measures were imposed and considers how quickly these measures were imposed relative to the onset of the spread of the virus. Moreover, it involves chronicling how quickly these lockdown measures were lifted. For those in opposition, we examine what position the PRR actors took in relation to government policies – broadly were they supportive of the policies or did they oppose the measures? And to what degree did their positions on pandemic response become salient for these actors?

How have PRR actors framed the politics of the pandemic?

Whether in opposition or in government, we explore the role that the ideological tenets of the PRR (authoritarianism, nativism and populism) played in framing the pandemic. In more specific terms, we look at whether the PRR has demonized international organizations (e.g. the World Health Organization (WHO) or EU), other countries (e.g. China as source) and/or other domestic actors as responsible (e.g. opponents for ‘politicizing’ the issue). At the same time, we examine whether authoritarian, populist and/or nativist tropes have been employed by the PRR to justify/criticize the approach towards the pandemic defended by the government/opposition.

What have been the effects of the pandemic on the popularity of the PRR?

For PRR actors in government this means differentiating between ‘rally-round-the-flag’ effects that occur in terms of government support in times of crisis and more sustained support for the PRR. To address this issue, the contributions to this special issue look at measures of popularity such as approval ratings and support for the policies advocated by the government. For PRR forces in opposition, the different case studies discuss the evidence of popularity of these actors and of their agenda. At the same time, for PRR forces both in government and in opposition it is possible to look at the elections that took place during 2020 and 2021, since this permits analysis of the extent to which support for the PRR has increased or diminished.

Comparative findings

The eight case studies included in this special issue provide interesting analyses and rich empirical material that help to give a better picture about the variance in the effects that the pandemic has had on the PRR. In this concluding section, we systematize the responses to the three research questions that this special issue seeks to

Table 1. Summary of PRR in Government Case-Study Findings to Research Questions

Case study	How did the PRR respond to the pandemic?	How did the PRR frame the pandemic	What effects did the pandemic have on the popularity of the PRR?
Brazil	Denialist approach. Permanent conflict with the legislature, judiciary and subnational governments regarding the policies to be implemented	Denialism based on populist rhetoric; ‘informational chaos’ and conspiratorial understanding of the pandemic	Bolsonaro’s approval closely related to the intensity of the health crisis and the effect of the economic relief programmes
Hungary	Key role of the military; relatively successful with the first wave, but emphasis on economic recovery led to mishandling of the second and third waves of the pandemic	Nativism played an important role in how the virus was framed (foreigners as responsible). Implementation of ‘national consultations’ to reinforce populist rhetoric	Little evidence for a rally-round-the-flag effect; the extent to which public opinion shared the opposition’s criticisms was strongly conditioned by partisan loyalties
Turkey	Began with hands-off approach and Erdoğan stood back in first phase; key role of experts	Eschewed populist framing and adoption of a technocratic frame; clear attempts to hide the intensity of the pandemic through manipulation of the figures	Popularity initially increased and then dropped away, but overall relative levels of support that are linked to partisanship
US	Downplay of the severity of the crisis, clashing with scientific and health expertise; delegation of responsibility to the subnational states. Economic recovery as the main preoccupation	Externalized blame by scapegoating others. Politicization of wearing masks in public/lockdowns; individual liberties as main trope	Despite Trump’s mishandling of the pandemic, he was not punished by the GOP electorate

address and we seek to offer an overview of the main lesson one can draw from these contributions (Tables 1 and 2 offer a summary of the findings of each case study on the three research questions arranged by PRR actors in opposition and in government).

How have PRR actors responded to the pandemic?

The responses of the PRR actors to the pandemic show significant variation across the cases examined in this special issue. We see changes of tack as the pandemic develops in some cases. We can also observe that there was no uniform response across the cases. Part of the variation might be related to different types of leadership. As we will argue, figures such as Bolsonaro and Trump are unique and

Table 2. Summary of PRR in Opposition Case-Study Findings to Research Questions

Case study	How did the PRR respond to the pandemic?	How did the PRR frame the pandemic?	What effects did the pandemic have on the popularity of the PRR?
France	Initially slow to react to the pandemic, but Marine Le Pen used COVID-19 response as part of attempt to normalize the party; steered clear of anti-vax positions but vacillated in masks and lockdown	Marine Le Pen and RN adopted an ambivalent strategy; while making a direct link between the pandemic and issues of security and immigration, they did not minimize the effects of COVID-19	Stable levels of public support and Marine Le Pen very well evaluated
Germany	Initially in favour of harsh measures, but later adopted a libertarian approach to attack lockdown measures and present itself as a defender of freedom	The pandemic was framed as an imported phenomenon, linked to the politics of open borders; criticism of elites and promotion of ideas developed by other experts	Although the party's core topic (nativism) lost saliency, the AfD maintained relatively stable levels of electoral support
Italy	Both PRR parties initially sought to downplay COVID-19 but then quickly moved to criticize government for not locking down hard enough	Both PRR parties emphasized the economic rather than the health consequences of the pandemic and attacked EU	LeGa lost public support, while the FdI gained public support
Spain	Frontal attack against the measures imposed by the 'socio-communist' government, i.e. self-portrayal as defender of freedom	Emphasis on nativism ('Chinese virus'); criticism of the government measures because of its authoritarianism, which was equated with the positions defended by left-wing dictatorships such as Cuba and Venezuela	No big variation in support for the party; presented itself as the most oppositional actor towards the government, mobilizing this way those conservative voters radically at odds with the government of Sánchez

therefore scholars should be cautious about making generalizations based on these spectacular but atypical instances of PRR leadership.

In terms of changing responses over time, there is not a clearly defined 'PRR playbook' for how to respond to a global health crisis. A number of case studies reveal indeed that PRR actors were initially feeling their way to a position. For instance, the RN in France advanced a slow response to the issue, with Marine Le Pen not staking a clear line until the pandemic developed (Froio 2022, in this special issue). In Germany, we can see that the AfD began with a position in favour

of harsh measures but as the pandemic developed, the party began to take a position that was more libertarian, becoming a harsh critic of the lockdown measures promoted by Merkel's administration (Lehmann and Zehnter 2022). In Italy, Lega initially downplayed the importance of COVID-19 before becoming critical of the government for not locking down hard enough, while the Brothers of Italy (FdI) also switched from downplaying the issue before supporting strict lockdown measures (Pirro 2022, in this special issue). Both Trump in the US and Bolsonaro in Brazil were consistently inconsistent in their response to the pandemic – sometimes downplaying the issue and, at other times, passing the responsibility to state governors (Roberts 2022; von Bülow and Abers 2022, in this special issue). By contrast, Erdoğan in Turkey followed a fairly constant response, characterized by the delegation of key decisions to health experts and respecting their advice (Laebens and Öztürk 2022).

In terms of the policies that were followed by PRR actors in power, or advocated by PRR actors in opposition, one can also identify significant variation. For those PRR forces in opposition, there was clear mileage to be had in attacking governments. Criticizing the government for not locking down hard enough was a position taken by the Lega in Italy (Pirro 2022), while PRR actors like VOX in Spain and the AfD in Germany attacked the lockdowns as being too restrictive, using their pandemic stances to position themselves as defenders of freedom. By contrast, Marine Le Pen in France endorsed the wearing of masks from an early stage, especially when the government was not enforcing a mask policy, but sometimes criticized government lockdown measures as too harsh and at other times for not being harsh enough (Froio 2022). For the PRR actors in government there was variation between Orbán taking a strong hands-on approach in Hungary (Batory 2022), but with Erdoğan taking a more hands-off approach deferring to other actors in Turkey (Laebens and Öztürk 2022), and Trump eventually effectively walking away from a public policy response and leaving it to individual states (Roberts 2022). In Brazil the government policy reflected strong denialism and was half-hearted, without clear policy on mass testing and contact tracing, while Bolsonaro not only actively excluded much activity from shut-downs but also eschewed a full federal response (von Bülow and Abers 2022).

Overall, then, it is clear that there was no consistent PRR response to the pandemic across the eight cases under scrutiny. There were authoritarian and libertarian reactions, and there was denialism in some cases and prioritization in others. There was support for lockdowns, attacks on lockdowns for being too draconian and for being not strict enough. Interestingly, those PRR actors in government did not respond in similar ways – there was delegation, centralization, playing down and prioritizing the issue. Over time there were also substantial changes in the positions of different actors. Part of this was clearly PRR actors coming to terms with an unprecedented situation, as indeed were all political actors. But it does also reveal that the COVID-19 issue has been addressed in different ways by different PRR actors. This may be a reflection of the chameleonic nature of populism (Taggart 2000) as well as of the different institutional settings in which the PRR is operating. Anti-establishment populist politics on the pandemic took the form of anti-science in some cases (e.g. Bolsonaro and Trump), while in others in opposition it was anti-government (e.g. AfD and VOX), and for some in

government it meant anti-subnational administrations where those subnational governments were not of the same party (e.g. Italy). The malleability of the ‘establishment’, even where there is a common health crisis, demonstrates that PRR responses do vary in practice from context to context and from PRR actor to actor.

Finally, it is worth noting that the examination of the range of cases also serves to caution against generalization from the spectacular. In fact, Trump and Bolsonaro are figures characterized by their bad manners and difficult relationships with their own party organizations, but this is not necessarily something typical of all PRR cases. For example, PRR leaders in government such as Erdoğan and Orbán have strong control over their own party organizations, and in consequence they were able to master a relatively coherent policy response towards the pandemic. Seen in this light, one important lesson one can draw from the comparative analysis of the different case studies included in this special issue is that who is in charge of the PRR matters when it comes to understanding the development of policy responses to a crisis, such as the one posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. As various scholars have emphasized, the organizational aspect of the PRR is quite important to better understand its political behaviour and electoral fortune (e.g. Art 2011; Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016; Mudde 2007).

How have PRR actors framed the politics of the pandemic?

The second research question we asked all our contributors to cover was the way in which the PRR actors framed the COVID-19 issue. As we have seen with the way in which they responded to the pandemic, there was significant variation. Nevertheless, given their ideological resemblance on the defence of authoritarian, nativist and populist ideas, we might expect PRR actors to frame the pandemic according to a similar palette. In practice, again, there were some broad similarities but there was also significant variation.

The use of a nativist frame was employed in a number of cases. Trump in the US employed a nativist approach by constantly referring to the ‘China virus’ and declaring that the Chinese government was responsible for the pandemic (Roberts 2022). In Spain, VOX talked in similar terms of the ‘China virus’ and explicitly blamed the Chinese government for the pandemic (Zanotti and Turnbull-Dugarte 2022, in this special issue) as did the AfD in Germany (Lehmann and Zehnter 2022). In Brazil, Bolsonaro also echoed the Trump approach, portraying the virus as Chinese (von Bülow and Abers 2022), but Andrea Pirro (2022) notes that neither Lega nor the FdI took an anti-Chinese position. In Hungary, Orbán used the COVID-19 issue to blame foreigners for spreading the virus (Batory 2022). However, Caterina Froio (2022) emphasizes that Marine Le Pen disassociated COVID-19 from nativism per se, but did link the issue to immigration. Open borders and immigration were seen by the AfD as contributing to the spread of the virus (Lehmann and Zehnter 2022). All in all, nativism did play a role in almost all PRR instances, but in different degrees and shapes.

When it comes to assessing the populist frame, one can identify that Trump used the pandemic to express his hostility to international institutions, accusing the WHO of being under Chinese control and eventually withdrawing the US from the WHO (Roberts 2022). VOX also took the same line as Trump in

portraying the WHO as in hock to the Chinese government (Zanotti and Turnbull-Dugarte 2022). In the EU context, the pandemic also saw PRR actors furthering their Euroscepticism and criticizing the EU for constraining vaccine rollout in the case of VOX (Zanotti and Turnbull-Dugarte 2022), for Brussels's inaction and for deficiencies in vaccine policy in the cases of both Fidesz (Batory 2022) and the AfD (Lehmann and Zehnter 2022). Marine Le Pen in France declared that the pandemic was a result of lack of borders embodied in the EU (Froio 2022), while both PRR parties in Italy were mainly focused on EU deficiencies in economic responses with respect to the pandemic rather than on failures in health policies (Pirro 2022). This means that populist tropes have been employed by almost all PRR forces analysed in this special issue, particularly to blame international actors and institutions as well as to portray them as part of 'the corrupt establishment' headed by progressives who are at odds with 'the pure people'. However, one can see a PRR actor taking a non-populist frame: for example Erdoğan adopted a technocratic approach and stressed the importance of expertise, but without necessarily showing strong support for multilateral organizations and solutions (Laebens and Öztürk 2022).

Finally, authoritarianism is another relevant factor that needs to be considered. Those actors in opposition, like VOX in Spain, used authoritarianism as a way of criticizing the government's response to the pandemic (Zanotti and Turnbull-Dugarte 2022), and similarly the AfD criticized the German government for its increasing authoritarianism in its pandemic response. And even Trump seemed to pass responsibility to individual states rather than centralize control as the pandemic developed (Roberts 2022). By contrast, Orbán used the pandemic to seize emergency powers (Batory 2022), and a similar approach can be observed in the case of Erdoğan in Turkey (Laebens and Öztürk 2022). In addition, we can see a contrast between those PRR actors that employed a security frame and those that focused on an anti-authoritarian frame. Those emphasizing the security of citizens focused on health security and advocated strong lockdown measures or criticized government responses for being insufficiently harsh. Those PRR actors emphasizing the anti-authoritarian frame were much more hostile to lockdown and stringent government responses and were more focused on prioritizing economic activity as well as individual liberty. What this reinforces is that the PRR actors varied considerably in how they framed the pandemic and so to generalize about a uniform 'populist radical right' framing of the pandemic risks creating a misleading oversimplification.

What have been the effects of the pandemic on the popularity of the PRR?

All the contributions of this special issue provide evidence about the approval ratings of the PRR. Despite some differences across cases, the general picture is marked by the fact that the popularity of PRR forces has not been deeply affected because of the pandemic. While it is true that some oscillations can be observed, in most instances one can see that there is a stable base of support, which continues to be in favour of the PRR irrespective of the actions and frames the latter has adopted because of the rise of COVID-19. This finding reinforces the point made by various scholars who argue that the PRR is anything but an ephemeral phenomenon: it is rather the by-product of structural transformations of contemporary societies and

therefore it is here to stay (Bale and Rovira Kaltwasser 2021; Mudde 2007, 2013; Rydgren 2018). Because sectors of the electorate are keen on endorsing authoritarian, nativist and populist ideas to promote a backlash against progressive values, it is not surprising that the PRR has gained a foothold across democracies worldwide. The contributions to this special issue demonstrate that the pandemic has not changed this demand – at the most it has put it on hold, as other topics that are beyond the classic scope of the PRR agenda have provisionally gained momentum. And while the focus of this collection is on the insurgent forces building on this demand, it is important to consider the role of mainstream parties in fostering this demand.

To what extent are there important differences in the support for the PRR in government and in opposition during the pandemic? The case-selection rationale of this special issue permits us to address this question, since four case studies are about the PRR in government and four case studies are about the PRR in opposition. When revisiting the PRR instances in Brazil, Hungary, Turkey and the US, the evidence provided by the contributions highlights that there is a strong base of support for the PRR, which to an important extent is independent of the latter's governmental performance. A 'rally-round-the-flag' effect, for example, benefited some PRR forces in power, while the dramatic consequences of the pandemic did not seriously threaten their core base of support. Trump's electoral result in the 2020 presidential is a good example in this regard. As Kenneth Roberts (2022) rightly points out, Trump was able to mobilize an impressive number of votes, despite his horrendous management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Another case in point is Orbán in Hungary, who approached the pandemic in a relatively effective way at the beginning, so that his popularity started to suffer only when the situation became more complicated for the country (Batory 2022), but this notwithstanding he was able to secure his power in the parliamentary elections that took place in April 2022. Similarly, Erdoğan in Turkey was able to maintain relatively high levels of public support, particularly during the first year of the pandemic, and interestingly, there are important partisan differences in the perceived salience of the pandemic (Laebens and Öztürk 2022). Finally, the Brazilian case study shows that despite significant changes in Bolsonaro's approval ratings, he has a very stable core constituency that endorses denialist ideas and fosters 'echo chambers' that galvanize the president (von Bülow and Naera Abers 2022). However, it remains to be seen if this public support is enough to secure the re-election of Bolsonaro at the end of 2022.

When looking at the four instances of the PRR in opposition, one can identify a similar trend: a relatively stable base of support. While the COVID-19 virus implied a major shift in the political debate, affecting the PRR's ability to set the agenda, the instances of the PRR in opposition analysed in this special issue reveal that they did not suffer major setbacks in terms of approval ratings. Despite some ebb and flow in their levels of support, none of the cases considered became electorally irrelevant. For example, the AfD in Germany received 2% less of the votes in the 2021 general election in comparison to the previous one, but it seems quite consolidated at the national level. As Pola Lehmann and Lisa Zehnter (2022) show, part of this stability is related to the fact that the AfD has been able to give voice to a segment of the electorate that is firmly at odds with mainstream parties in particular, and

progressive values in general. At the same time, the Italian case study reveals declining support for one PRR party (Lega) but growing support for the other PRR party (FdI), so that the electoral outcome is not particularly bad for the PRR seen as a whole (Pirro 2022). Spain offers another instance of stability in the approval of the PRR. Lisa Zanotti and Stuart Turnbull-Dugarte (2022) demonstrate that indeed VOX relies on a loyal base of adherents, many of whom were extremely pleased with the party's frontal attack on Zapatero's left-wing government and its approach to the pandemic. Finally, the French situation is also very telling, because Marine Le Pen made strategic use of expert knowledge and populist logics to try to improve her credibility in mainstream public debates, to the point that she was well evaluated by the electorate (Froio 2022).

Concluding remarks

The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply affected the world as countries have had to deal with an unprecedented health challenge with important socioeconomic and sociopolitical consequences. Scholarship on the politics of the pandemic has been growing, and part of this research is focused on the PRR (e.g. Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2020; Ringe and Rennó 2022; Wondreys and Mudde 2022). This special issue aims to shed new light on this topic, in particular on the impact of COVID-19 on the fate of the PRR. With the aim of better understanding the extent to which the pandemic has affected the electoral fortune of PRR forces, we have selected four cases of the PRR in government (Bolsonaro in Brazil, Orbán in Hungary, Erdoğan in Turkey and Trump in the US) and four cases of the PRR in opposition (the RN in France, Lega and FdI in Italy, AfD in Germany and VOX in Spain). When looking at these cases, one of the most important lessons one can draw is that the COVID-19 pandemic has not substantially affected the fate of PRR forces. Although there were initial responses during the pandemic that prophesied the demise of the PRR as a result of the pandemic, that has not come to pass in our eight case studies. On the one hand, the evidence from the instances of the PRR in opposition under scrutiny reveal that their levels of public support have not been deeply affected, despite the fact that the political agenda has been moved in a direction that is not favourable for the kind of issues that the PRR stand for. On the other hand, the fortunes of PRR actors in power have been tied to or turned by COVID-19. While Trump has lost power, Roberts (2022) shows that the 2020 election was not decisively swayed by Trump's handling of the pandemic (see also Jacobson 2021). At the same time, Agnes Batory (2022) as well as Laebens and Öztürk (2022) argue that both Erdoğan and Orbán remain in power and as strong as ever. Only Bolsonaro seems, at the time of writing, to be under threat in his re-election campaign in 2022. However, as Marisa von Bülow and Rebecca Naera Abers (2022) convincingly argue, despite his denialist approach and awful handling of the pandemic, there is still an important part of the population in favour of Bolsonaro's PRR project.

Moreover, the case studies analysed in this special issue demonstrate that the policy response and the framing of COVID-19 varied between different PRR actors. Belonging to a similar ideological family did not mean that there was a common response to the issue. While opposition PRR actors used the issue to attack

government, they did so in different ways – for not being stringent enough or for being too stringent, for example. For those PRR actors in government the responses varied from supporting a technocratic response (Erdoğan) to vacillation (Bolsonaro and Trump), to grabbing powers to take a stringent response (Orbán). One possible factor in explaining the reaction of PRR actors may lie in their levels of institutionalization. In the cases of France and Turkey, well-established PRR actors, either as opposition or government forces, clearly took a less bombastic line on COVID-19, perhaps indicating a moderating effect of longevity or government participation for these actors. By contrast, instances of the PRR that are controlled by maverick figures (Trump in the US and Bolsonaro in Brazil) followed a much more erratic path, marked not only by erratic responses but also by an attack on the opinion of scientific expertise. Nevertheless, this seems to be the exception rather than rule, and in consequence it would be wrong to assume that there is such a thing as the ‘populist radical right playbook’ about confronting the pandemic.

In summary, this special issue reveals that the PRR remains a strong political actor in the 21st century. The pandemic has not seriously affected the electoral appeal of this kind of political actor, since they have been able to develop frames and tactics to maintain public support for an important sector of the electorate. Therefore, the pandemic reinforces the idea that the PRR has the capacity to adapt itself to different contexts and master challenges of a different kind, so that it would be flawed to assume that the PRR will disappear because of external shocks such as the one posed by COVID-19.

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Note

1 For full details see the codebook at: <https://github.com/OxCGRT/covid-policytracker/blob/master/documentation/codebook.md>.

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